U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Ephemeral
Wakulla Co.

St. Marks

National Wildlife Refuge

The National Refuge System is an extensive network of lands and waters protected and managed especially for wildlife and its habitat. Refuges stretch across the United States from above the Arctic Circle in Alaska to the subtropical waters of the Florida Keys and beyond to the Caribbean and South Pacific. The National Wildlife Refuge System is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service which protects and manages over 500 refuges for wildlife and for people to enjoy.

This blue goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become a symbol of the refuge system.

Introduction

St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1931 to provide wintering habitat for migratory birds, is one of the oldest refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System. It is located in Wakulla, Jefferson, and Taylor counties along the Gulf coast of northwest Florida, about 25 miles south of Tallahassee, Florida.

photo: Frank Zontek

The topography is relatively flat, with soils and woodlands interspersed with ponds and sawgrass sloughs. Elevations range from the open water of Apalachee Bay and the barrier beaches to approximately 30 feet about mean sea level. In addition, there are seven rivers and numerous creeks crossing the refuge. The climate is moderate, with temperatures ranging from 21 to 96 degrees, and with an annual rainfall of 55 inches.

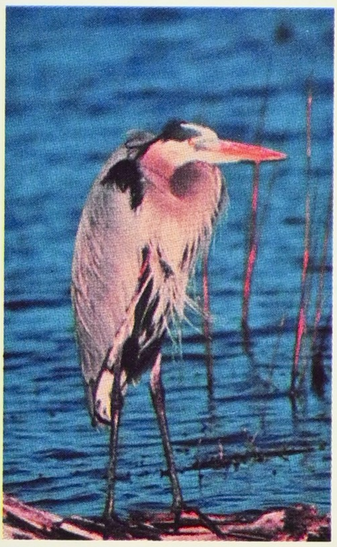

photo: Joe Reinman

St. Marks is divided into three units. The St. Marks Unit is east of the St. Marks River and is primarily slash pine flatwoods, swamps, manmade impoundments, as well as freshwater and saltwater marshes. The Office/ Visitor Center is located here on Lighthouse Road and most of the public use occurs on this unit, where wildlife observation, fishing, cycling, and hiking are excellent.

The Wakulla Unit lies between the Wakulla River and Spring Creek and is mostly hardwood hammocks, swamps and pine flatwoods. The Panacea Unit is west of Shell Point to the Ochlockonee River and is mostly pine flatwoods and sandhills, dotted with freshwater lakes, and tidal marshes. Each unit is unique and contributes to the overall diversity of plants and wildlife that makes St. Marks significant.

cover photo: D.J. Voros

A Look Back

Paleo-Indians occupied this area over 10,000 years ago. The Apalachee Indians, often called the earliest inhabitants, were modern day descendants of the Paleo-Indians. Spanish explorers arrived in the early 1500's and by 1639, a port was established at the town of St. Marks. Fort San Marcos de Apalache, first built in 1679 at the confluence of the Wakulla and St. Marks Rivers, suffered numerous attacks by pirates and soldiers.

photo: Robin Will

Today, the remains of the fort and a small museum are a state park. Limestone mined from what is now the Wakulla Unit of the Refuge was used to rebuild the fort, and to eventually, build the foundation of the St. Marks lighthouse, constructed in 1831. The lighthouse, located at the terminus of Lighthouse Road in the St. Marks Unit, is still in operation today. It survived gun boat battles, the landing of Federal troops during the Civil War, as well as hurricanes and tropical storms and is now on the National Register of Historic Sites.

This area has long provide rich natural resources to its residents. Families that made sea salt during the Civil War were exempt from military service. Thus, the refuge saltmarshes are dotted with the remains of sea water evaporation vats and their brick foundations.

Another source of revenue came from timber, and much of the Refuge was logged before being sold to the government. Turpentine production, dependent on the area's pine forests, was a principal industry in the early 1900s. Also, free-ranging cattle and hogs fed on the native grasses of what is now the refuge.

Wildlife

St. Marks is well-known as an oasis of different habitats for wildlife. Natural salt marshes, tidal flats, and freshwater impoundments attract thousands of waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds and other animals.

photo: Joe Reinman

The open marshes and swamps also provide a home to over 2,000 American alligators. In addition, the salt marshes are a valuable nursery area for fish, shrimp, and shellfish and provide protection during storms to shorebirds and other migrants. Apalachee Bay is home to bottlenose dolphins, brown pelicans, wintering redhead ducks, and a rich diversity of marine life.

photo: J. Greene

Another vital habitat are the hardwood swamps, which support wood ducks, night herons, black bears, otter, and raccoons, to name a few.

photo: J. Greene

Finally, the extensive pine woodlands offer food and cover for turkeys, white-tailed deer, bluebirds, fox squirrels, gopher tortoises, Bachman's sparrows, red-cockaded woodpeckers, pine warblers, and many more species.

photo: J. Greene

Of the more than 300 species of birds recorded on the refuge, 98 species nest here. Some 19 species of ducks and two species of geese may be seen from mid-November through January. Migrating hawks, falcons,

photo: Joe Reinman

and shorebirds also use the Refuge. Three species of endangered/ threatened birds nest on the refuge: Southern bald eagle, least tern, and red-cockaded woodpecker.

Other endangered or rare species found on the refuge include the: wood stork, American alligator, indigo snake, swallow-tailed kite, peregrine falcon and Florida black bear. Occasionally, visitors glimpse loggerhead sea turtles and West Indian manatees offshore by the lighthouse. Many state-listed threatened and endangered plants are also found on the refuge.

The 52 species of mammals recorded here include the relatively new armadillo and coyote, as well as the non-native jaguarundi and feral hog. In addition, the refuge is host to 40 species of amphibians and 65 species of reptiles.

photo: Joe Reinman

Management

St. Marks NWR staff focus on the protection and enhancement of natural habitats for wildlife. In pine woods, for example, management techniques for multi-age stands include thinning and prescribed burning to mimic the natural effects of storm winds, droughts and lightning-caused fires. Fire plays an important role in the ecosystem by reducing fuels on the forest floor, releasing nutrients in

photo: Larry Williams

photo on right: Frank Zoutek

St. Marks National Wildlife
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the soil, and stimulating certain plants to produce seeds and fruits for wildlife. Planting native pines also helps to restore the historic environment.

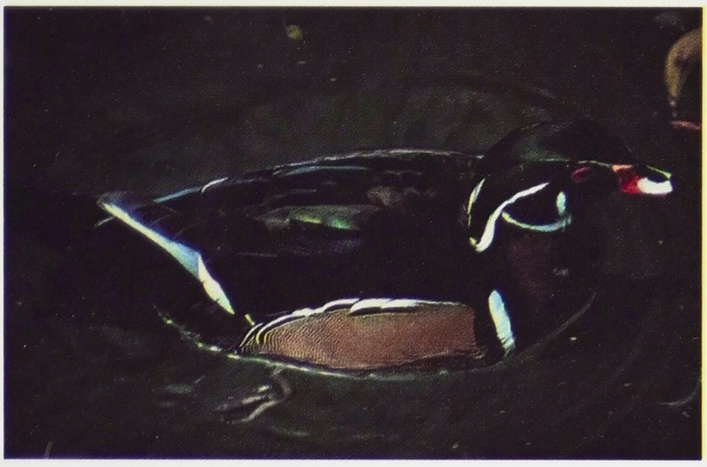

photo: J. Greene

In the impoundments, management techniques include water level management for wildlife food growth and access, as well as salt water introduction, burning and spot herbicide treatment for noxious plant control. The staff monitors the growth of such valuable plants such as wigeon grass, which is favored by wintering ducks.

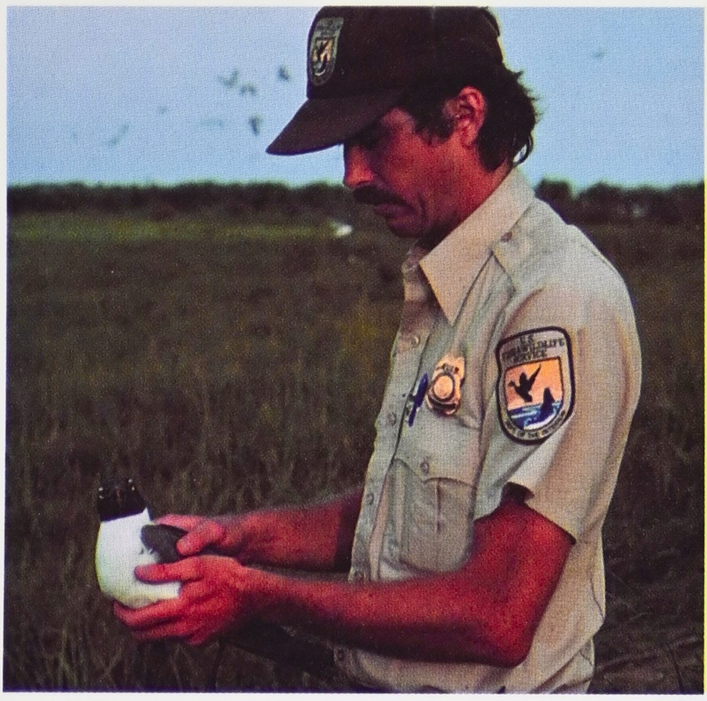

photo: Robin Will

Outdoor Education and Recreation

Public use programs bring people and wildlife together. Approximately 5000 school children visit the refuge each year to learn about wildlife and wildlands. Special events for the public during the year include: Coastal Cleanup (September), Monarch Butterfly Festival (October), migratory bird tours (November, December, January, April), and Spring Wildflower Day (April). Roughly 270,000 visitors come to St. Marks

photo: Robin Will

photo: Evie O'Brien

NWR each year to birdwatch, photograph, hike, fish, picnic, hunt, bicycle and simply enjoy the serenity and beauty of the refuge.

Make Your Visit Meaningful

St. Marks Refuge offers something for everyone who appreciates and enjoys nature. First-timers especially should stop at the Visitor Center and become acquainted with several displays describing refuge wildlife and habitats before venturing out. The Visitor Center is open Monday through Friday from 8:15 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and on Saturday and Sunday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The Visitor Center is closed on federal holidays. The refuge is open during daylight hours.

photo: USFWS

The main route to view wildlife is Lighthouse Road. It is roughly seven miles from the Visitor Center to the historical St. Marks Lighthouse at the end of the road. Many visitors enjoy cycling this route early in the morning to see wildlife. A wildlife drive guide is for sale in the Visitor Center bookstore, as are many other field guides, insect repellant, postcards, t-shirts, etc. Supporting the bookstore through purchases and memberships helps the St. Marks Refuge Association, Inc. assist the refuge with educational and biological programs.

Insects and sun can make an enjoyable day quickly turn uncomfortable so be prepared before starting out. Wear a hat, closed shoes, and carry water. You may want to carry insect repellant and sunscreen. Of course, bring your binoculars, field guides and camera!

photo: Kathy Blaha

Being in the right place at the right time ensures successful wildlife sightings and photo opportunities. Knowing the animals likely to be found in certain habitats and patiently waiting helps, too. A bird and unusual wildlife sighting log is kept in the Visitor Center to assist you. Remember that wild animals can be unpredictable and should never be fed or approached.

photo: Dean Jue

Hunting is allowed in designated areas for resident game species from Fall through Spring. Contact the refuge for current dates, regulations and permits.

St. Marks Refuge is open to fishing all year in refuge impoundments along Lighthouse Road and Otter Lake on S.R. 372A. Boats, including canoes, with motors of up to 10 HP, are permitted in refuge pools from March 15-October 15.

Popular crabbing areas include the shore and impoundments along Lighthouse Road. Be careful of gators trying to eat your bait!

photo on left: Joe Reinman

Boat launching is permitted where marked. Saltwater access is available at the end of Lighthouse Road, the Aucilla River boat ramp, and the county ramp at 372-A near Panacea. Freshwater access is available at Otter Lake and East River Pool.

photo: Tim Harrison

Launching of commercial or sport net boats from the saltwater boat ramp on Lighthouse Road is prohibited.

Fall, Winter, and Spring provide the best hiking times at St. Marks. Two primitive walking trails, marked on the map, on the St. Marks Unit (7 and 13 miles) and two on the Panacea Unit (5 and 9 miles) offer views of different habitats. Shorter nature trails wind behind the Visitor Center, near Headquarters Pond, around Tower Pond, and along the Lighthouse Levee.

The Florida National Scenic Trail covers 43 miles through the refuge. For more information on trails, consider purchasing the booklet "Hiking the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge" from the Refuge bookstore. Some parts of the refuge may be closed seasonally to protect sensitive wildlife areas.

Other Refuge Regulations

Entrance Fees are required of all refuge visitors traveling beyond the Visitor Center on Lighthouse Road through the refuge. Annual and daily passes are available. Educational groups and official visitors must stop at the Visitor Center for a non-fee pass.

Trash receptacles are provided, but please take litter and trash home when possible.

Taking government property or any natural feature, artifact, animal or plant is prohibited.

Weapons, firearms, bows and fireworks are prohibited.

ATVs are not allowed.

Pets must be on a leash under the owner's control at all times. Alligators have been known to attack even large dogs.

For further information, contact:
Refuge Manager
St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge
P.O. Box 68
St. Marks, Florida 32355
850/925 6121

Web site: http://saintmarks.fws.gov

photo: Joe Reinman

St. Marks
National Wildlife Refuge
Visitor Center
1255 Lighthouse Road
St. Marks, Florida 32355
850/925 6121

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
1 800/344 WILD
http://www.fws.gov/~r4eao

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